

Starry Night

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Summary: Long after the Combine defeat, an adventurous teenage girl finds an unlocked gate in her back garden that leads to a history she'd always seen as no more than a legend.

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Well, Mom is up at the Legislature, late session as usual. Probably her fault. She argues too much. Dad's out of town on some assignment, as usual. Some waste tank that's leaking. It must be a bad one if they asked him to come personally. Keisha and Tiny are taking care of the house, but Tiny's already asleep, and Keisha's in the living room, I think with her boyfriend. Anyway, the door is locked. She's _such_ a slut.

I just met someone... and I can't remember her name. Damn. I should know it, but I always fall asleep in History and Civics. And I didn't bring my textbook home this weekend. One of those people in books who you never think are real. Well, she's not only _really_ real, she's our neighbour to the back. I knew this was a good neighbourhood, but I never thought that people like her... I guess they have to live somewhere.

It was early evening but dark already. The sky was clear and the stars were very brilliant. Mom told me that before the war, the first one, before the Combine came I mean, you could hardly see the stars in the city because the city lights were so strong. We're losing them again, she said. The price of progress. I don't know. They still seem pretty bright to me.

Maybe it's because the back yard is so dark. The hedge is eight or nine feet tall all the way around. There's fence too in places, but nowhere you can see through. Completely private, my mother said when we moved in. No one can see us here. We can walk around naked in the

back yard. As if I would want to do that! Yuk. Anyway, I thought it was kind of creepy with the hedge going up on three sides and the house on the fourth, kind of like a box. The whole house is a bit creepy. It's all pre-Combine, they say. That means that it's all kind of dark and quiet. As if it were thinking about things, what's happened since.

Anyway I was out there wandering on the lawn and the sky was dark and of course the yard was totally dark. The only light came from the house. There wasn't much because someone had closed all the living room blinds and turned off most of the lights. Keisha's really too much. If she gets into trouble, she'll find that working for Mom won't do her that much good. Anyway, I was just walking around near the back fence and looking at all the stars, and I got to the little door in the fence. I'd never seen that door open and I didn't think it could open. The hedge had grown all over it. It used to be for emergencies, Mom said. Like if the house caught on fire and the people in it had to run out the back.

So I got to this little door and I saw someone had done something to it. The branches were cut away. I put my hand on the door and got some gunk on it. Someone had been oiling the hinges. Maybe it was a safety thing, I thought. They've been on and on at school recently about how we have to be prepared for anything.

I tried the door. To my total surprise, it wasn't locked. I opened it an inch or two and then stopped. It was frightening but I was tempted. Maybe it would never be open again. Then I'd feel like a real idiot for not going through.

But I didn't even know what was on the other side. Or who. There must be a house there, but I'd never seen it. Our road curves away from the house not toward it or around it. Maybe there was just nothing.

I went through. I had to stoop quite low. They must have made these doors for kids, I thought.

On the other side. I stood up and looked around. It was a house and yard, like ours, but the yard was much bigger. There was a pond to the right, and the stars reflected in it. The house at front was almost completely dark, so I couldn't see exactly how big it was. There was only one light burning, at the back door, I think.

I looked to the left. More lawn, and a fence and hedge further off, much further off. And a single pine tree, very tall, without too many branches, especially low down. It was pretty battered. It looked like it had been there forever.

At the foot of the tree was a dark shape lit by a very faint light, the sort of light you use to read in bed at night. I looked harder. It was a wheelchair, the powered kind that you almost never see now, though they used to have a lot of them before the Combine came, I think. A woman was in the chair. She was just sitting there, wrapped in a blanket, leaning back, looking at the stars. She didn't seem to know I was there at all, even though I was only about twelve feet away from her.

She seemed familiar somehow, as if I'd met her before. She was a very old woman. Not wrinkled that much, but worn. She looked very tired

and something else, I don't know. I could see her hair was silver in the dark. And she just kept looking up into the sky.

I felt I was intruding. Kind of like I'd stepped into something private. That I wasn't really supposed to have seen. I began to back slowly away. Maybe if I was very quiet, I could get back thorough the door before she noticed me. That's what I was thinking, I think.

Suddenly she spoke to me. I never get away with anything, I thought. I was really frightened. She must be someone important to be living here. Maybe she even knew my mother. Then I'd be like, totally screwed. Grounded forever. Or even worse.

"You needn't worry. If I didn't want you to come in, I wouldn't have had the gate repaired."

That frightened me even more, really. That she wanted me in here. For what?

The old lady was still looking at the stars.

"I need you. If you want to help me, that is. It's time for me to pass something on. A responsibility. Maybe nothing."

I nodded. "Maybe I can help you," I squeaked out. And then felt stupid for answering in such a weird voice.

I took a deep breath. "But I don't know what I can do. I'm really not good at anything. Yet." Thank goodness I was back to my normal voice.

She smiled into the sky. Still looking up there as she talked, not at me. "That was why I had the gate repaired. If you were enterprising enough to come through it, I knew you would be the right person. It was a little test."

So I was supposed to be here. That made me feel better. At least I wasn't going to get punished. But what did she want me for?

After that, she didn't say anything for a while. Just kept on looking into the sky, at the stars.

Finally, I asked her what she was looking for. Another long silence.

"A friend," she said. Her voice was very soft.

Another long silence. I began to worry that Mom would come home and find me missing. She'd never believe that someone like this lady would want to talk to me. She'd think that I'd just pushed in.

"Have you ever lost someone you cared for?" she said, finally, in a very soft voice, her eyes on the stars all the time.

"No..." I replied. "Christina, she's a classmate, she died of cancer last year, but I didn't really know her. I was sad, though."

"Cancer, yes," she nodded. "From the Combine, with love. If it

weren't for people like your father, we'd all be dead by now."

She began again, "Every time I close my eyes, I see the battle, their last defeat. Destroyed them, but at such a high price. So many dead. I see them all in my dreams, every night. Every single night. Every night I see myself hit again, collapsing, knowing instantly that I would never walk again. But he saved me. Got me to safety. And then he had to go. They summoned him, just as soon as the battle was won, and he had to go. And he's never returned."

She raised a hand to wipe her eyes, and I noticed she'd been silently crying. I felt like crying too. I recognized part of her story from our history texts. I knew who she was, how old she must be now, nearly a hundred years old. And every night dreaming, all those years.

"Is that why you are looking at the stars all the time?" I said, hesitantly.

She nodded. "He's out there, somewhere. They called him a _valuable asset_. He's still alive. I don't suppose they let him age. Only a few years older, at most."

She shook her head. "The first time he was taken was when I was a very little girl, and he came back when I was twenty-two. So I thought... maybe after twenty years? But no. He's never been back. Now it's nearly eighty years."

A pause. "I won't be here when he comes back. If he comes back. That's why I need you. I had my staff pull your medical files. You're in perfect health. Another eighty years at least."

I shuddered. It was creepy having someone calculating when I would die. Even if it was pretty good news on the whole.

"Come here." Some people have that natural voice of command, you know? She was used to giving orders, I could tell. It wasn't a harsh tone, just... firm.

I went to stand beside her wheelchair. But I'm too tall so I knelt in the grass in front of her. She smiled a smile like a ghost and shook her head a bit.

"I'm not a princess. You needn't kneel."

"It's better this way. I don't mind. Otherwise one of us has to twist around to see properly," I replied.

She had something in the palm of her hand that glittered faintly in the light of the stars.

"I want to give you something, and ask that you deliver a message for me. In case he does come back after I'm dead. Can you do that?"

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, automatically.

She laughed briefly. "Why so serious? It's a very simple message."

I nodded. She looked at the stars again.

And said, very softly, "I think you can guess what the message is." I nodded and gulped.

"You want me to tell him that you loved him. Love him. But he'll know already."

Looking at me again, she smiled. "It's not something that you ever get tired of hearing," she said. "And he will be very sad if he comes back and all his friends are dead. I want to spare him that if I can. He'll need someone to say it even though he knows it."

She leaned forward with the glittering thing in her hand and I saw it was a ring on a necklace chain. A silver ring like a circle of branches, with green stones glittering here and there.

"An engagement ring," she said softly. "He gave it to a woman who is many, many years dead now, and when she was dying, that woman passed it on to me. And now I am older than I ever imagined anyone could ever be, and I give it to you. I can't give the love. You'll find your own love. I hope with someone who is not anyone else's _valuable asset_. But I want you to return it to him if you can. And give him the message he already knows. Always knew. If he comes back."

She hung the chain around my neck. It was a decisive movement, somehow, something ending and beginning again. I looked down, touched the ring, and whispered, "Are you going to die soon?"

She laughed. Almost a happy laugh. "Not if I can help it," she said. "But I'm ninety-eight years old. If I don't take matters into my own hands now, they'll put the ring in a museum and have me record something and bury it in a time capsule. I can't have that."

I nodded and said I understood.

"I think you do," she said. "I knew you would. And now it's time for us both to go to sleep. Don't worry about your mother. She's still at the Assembly. I asked one of my friends to keep contradicting her and I suppose they're arguing still." She smiled. "Your mother is a wonderful person, dear, but she can never let anyone have the last word. I'll speak to her so she doesn't wonder where you got the ring."

That was a relief. I'd been wondering how I would explain that.

"I'll stay outside for a bit longer," she said. "You get along now. Don't worry about me."

I walked over to the fence and turned and waved goodbye. She waved back. And then I went back into our yard and shut the fence door behind me.

I feel really weird.

I know she means the best and I know I'll do what she asked if I can. But I feel as if someone just set the terms of my future for me. A mission.

I couldn't help thinking I'd become her _valuable asset_ too. Strange

and a bit creepy. As if a hand had come out of a history book and dragged me into it.

But I'll do it.

End
file.